

What is normal child development?

How do we know if our children are developing normally? What is 'normal' behaviour? Is there such a thing as 'normal'?

Childhood (ages 6-11) : Normal child development is :

Physical, cognitive, social-emotional and behavioural

This week we will focus on **social-emotional** which involves the development of relationships with others and learning of social norms (what is acceptable) and customs.

Children around this time develop skills around learning about others. This involves self-worth and self-esteem, comparing oneself to others, (self-esteem can drop around this time) and learning how to respond and react within social situations. Children will react to positive and negative criticism, and basically learn to interact with the social world and establish his or her position in it.

What this means also is that children will test each other, argue and compete with each other sometimes in unpleasant ways. This is a natural part of development and establishes a pecking order within the social norms. When this gets out of hand such as physical intimidation or name-calling or constant lowering of a child's self-worth – this is when the behaviour needs to be modified and a responsible adult needs to intervene.

Under-reacting (normalising) rather than *over-reacting* to these situations really helps with good communication (asking questions such as 'how do you feel, how do you think that makes the other person feel...'. By normalising the behaviour and working on strategies helps children lessen the more negative aspects of socialisation and encourage the more positive attributes of learning about others. This is the key for encouraging healthy relationships.

The need for self-control increases during this period and two factors that are important here are '*delayed gratification*' (being able to wait for something good), and *impulse control* (able to control oneself) through observation of peers and others.

Who your child plays with at this stage is also relevant, whether it be girls or boys: regardless of gender, your child will choose a peer group for many different reasons. It is best for children to sort out their friendships with each other, without adult help unless there are of course issues of bullying or threats for example. Friendships are based on trust in one another but also kindness, support and mutual enjoyment of similar activities and hobbies.

Beginning at the age of 8, children start to realise that they can experience more than one emotion at once and become smart in being able to interpret other people's emotions. An

11-year-old may be upset that he can't stay up to watch TV but will not typically scream or cry (like a 4-year-old) because he may have a better understanding of why he can't stay up (school the next day). Children at school age are able to develop coping skills and rely on working out problems (problem-focused coping). The 10-year-old may be hurt about not being invited to a party but may seek social support by talking about it with a friend (emotion-centred coping).

Empathy is another complex emotional state that develops around this time. Children become better at thinking and identifying emotions of others and are able to empathise with others. This is a gradual skill so don't be alarmed if your child is still not showing much empathy yet!

It is a fascinating and challenging time, watching your child grow into an adolescent, and you can be there to support and help them along their path towards the next step in their development. Sometimes, like we encourage our children, talking to someone is always helpful. As a community we are aiming at raising healthy, happy children with healthy self-esteem and self-worth. We can certainly encourage that in our little ones, not matter what age they are!

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References

International Association for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Allied Professions;
<iacapap.org>

